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August Sander's *Der Bauer* and the Pervasiveness of the Peasant Tradition

By Christian Weikop

20 March 2013

[Tate Papers Issue 19](#)

Examining August Sander's *Der Bauer* group of photographs in relation to the historical representation of peasants in German art, Christian Weikop draws distinctions between Sander's interest in peasant types and the ideological agendas of National Socialist proponents of racial purity.

'People whose habits I had known from my youth seemed, by virtue of their strong connection with nature, ideally suited to the realisation of my idea', wrote [August Sander](#) (1876–1964) of the Westerwald peasants or farmers who were among his first photographic subjects (fig.1), and who were included in the first portfolio of 'origins' or 'archetypes' (in German, the 'Stammappe') of what formed his extensive but ultimately unfinished photographic project *People of the Twentieth Century* (*Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts*).¹ Westerwald, the wooded, low mountain region spread over the German federal states of Rhineland-Palatinate, Hesse, and North Rhine-Westphalia, was the region where the photographer was born and raised, and it was where he travelled in search of new clients after setting up his portrait studio in Cologne-Lindenthal in 1910, having returned to Germany the previous year from Linz, Austria.

In German there is no real lexical distinction between 'peasant' and 'farmer'; the word 'Bauer' is used to describe the agricultural labour force of pre-industrial, industrial, and postindustrial Germany. In the English language the use of the word 'peasant' seems anachronistic when discussing the rural population of post-feudal societies, but it is notable that in the English-language literature on Sander's photographs, the word 'peasant' is used as frequently as 'farmer' in translations of the German captions of the 'Stammappe', or for the titles of photographs in the first of the seven groups of the project, called *Der Bauer*, to which this portfolio belongs.² While 'farmer' is perhaps more accurate a term for describing those who work on the land in a post-feudal system, the term 'peasant', derived from the fifteenth-century French word *païsant*, meaning one from the

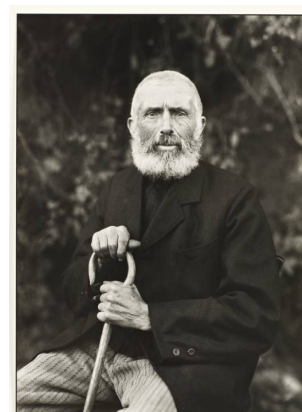


Fig.1
August Sander
The Man of the Soil
1910
Gelatin silver print on paper
image: 258 x 189 mm
frame: 482 x 382 x 32 mm
ARTIST ROOMS Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. Lent by Anthony d'Offay 2010

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pays (countryside), can be more helpful in considering the 'rooted' idea and image of rural labour that Sander's work, as well as that of other late nineteenth- and twentieth-century German artists, often project.³

The tradition of peasant representation in Germany

Historically, the idea and archaising image of the peasant has often had a cohering purpose and nostalgic resonance in Germany, both at times of unity and division. As the art historian Keith Moxey has pointed out, the figure of the peasant dates from an early period: 'peasants had appeared as staffage in Christian iconography, in paintings, for example, of Christ's birth or of his Passion. They were also found in the illustration of political treatises, histories and agricultural handbooks, but they were most conspicuously present as a class in cycles of the months as represented in sculpture, tapestries, or illuminated manuscripts.'⁴ During the late medieval period and throughout the Renaissance, the peasant became a key motif forming part of an anti-aesthetic alternative canon that art historians now refer to as the 'grotesque'. From the late fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, the peasant topos developed in all sorts of ways, and artists, especially Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) and the Nuremberg school, created a visual repertoire that included dancing peasants, the drunken carousing peasant, and the peasant 'fool'. Southern German 'carnival' woodcuts by artists such as Erhard Schön (1491–1542), Hans Weiditz (1495–c.1537), and Peter Flötner (c.1490–1546) often provided a rich visual counterpart to the burgeoning *Narrenliteratur* (fool-literature) of writers such as Hans Sachs (1494–1576) and Sebastian Brandt (1457–1521). Various visual representations of the peasant could also be found in popular literature and propaganda around the time of the German Peasants' War (1525), and this momentous historical event led to a proliferation of peasant images, some positive and some negative, but reaching an apogee by the 1530s in the work of the brothers Sebald and Barthel Beham, who rendered their festive peasant scenes in woodcut, and who in many respects were the German equals of the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525–1569; sometimes known as the 'Peasant Breugel'). According to the art historian Herbert Zschelletschky, the importance of Sebald Beham's prints as exemplified by *Large Peasant Holiday* 1535 lay in his assertion of the significance of the peasant class for society as a whole, bringing the peasantry 'as a class to the consciousness of all other classes', and perhaps this is not so different to what Sander was trying to achieve in the medium of photography with his 'Stammappe' some four hundred years later.⁵

By the mid-to-late nineteenth century, a nostalgic celebration or idealisation of peasant life could be identified in the work of artists such as Ludwig Richter (1803–1884) and Hans Thoma (1839–1924). Richter's many wood engravings and drawings illustrating well-known German folk tales conveyed a 'cosy' (in German, *gemütlich*) peasant existence, often in the setting of a nurturing arboreal landscape, a mythic but contained 'homeland' (*Heimat*) that corresponded to prevailing bourgeois Biedermeier values. After German Unification in 1871, when the social effects of industrialisation were being contemplated in the states that made up the new German empire, the piety of the peasant became a central concern for artists and writers. Wilhelm Leibl's representations of Bavarian folk – large canvases that presented individuals as ethical and ethnical 'types' – were highly acclaimed by critics who preferred his 'peasant painting', influenced by Lucas Cranach (c.1472–1553) and other artists of the German Renaissance, to the allegedly more 'Francophile' peasants of Secession artists such as [Max Liebermann](#) (1847–1935) and Fritz von Uhde (1848–1911). In the wake of Unification, an anti-urban 'back-to-nature' movement took off, fuelled by the eulogising of rural life as an embodiment of lost cultural values, sentiments expressed in important publications such as Wilhelm Riehl's four volume *The Natural History of the German People as a Foundation of German Social Politics* (1851–69), Ferdinand Tönnies's *Community and Civil Society* (1887), and Julius Langbehn's hugely popular

Rembrandt as Educator (1890). Langbehn was also a great admirer of Leibl, whom he saw as having some kinship with Rembrandt and whose work he felt pointed to artistic tendencies of the future. In *Rembrandt as Educator* Langbehn argued that Rembrandt was actually from peasant stock, and he co-opted him as a true *Niederdeutsch* (Low German), which he defined as culturally the strongest of Germany's indigenous 'tribes'. In Langbehnian terms, Rembrandt thereby became a symbol of the German rather than Dutch peasant tradition, and this idea was a pervasive one. It is not known whether Sander knew of Langbehn's book, but he certainly admired Rembrandt. As art historian Ulrich Keller has observed: 'he furnished his studio like a painter's, wore velvet clothes, and gave a place of honour in his home to a reproduction of Rembrandt's famous Dresden self-portrait.'⁶

While Langbehn stressed *Niederdeutschland* as the spiritual centre of Germany, his Rembrandt book more generally valorised German regionalism. His writing appealed not just to artists of north German artist colonies such as Worpswede, of which Fritz Mackensen (1866–1953), Carl Vinnen (1863–1922), and Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907) were key figures, but the *völkisch* (ethnic) ideas of his book also had currency in artist colonies in other parts of Germany, for instance in Dachau, Bavaria, where artists such as Arthur Langhammer (1854–1901), Adolf Hölzel (1853–1934), and Ludwig Dill (1848–1940) were located. A visual culture started to evolve that expressed the notion of *Heimatkunde* (an almost untranslatable term referring to the lore of local geography and history), and in the face of rapid urbanisation and the impersonal social relations mediated by the transactions of commerce, a yearning for a pre-industrial, rural era where community ties were closer became evident. The sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies lamented the loss of rural and village community in the face of industrial urbanism: 'everyone who praises rural life has pointed to the fact that people there have a stronger and livelier sense of Community. Community means genuine, enduring life together, whereas Society is a transient and superficial thing.'⁷ In terms of sociology, Sander's photographs also seem incredibly important in visually registering these major rural to urban societal shifts.

People of the soil

The cultural historian Michael Jennings has considered the 'cityward' movement of society in Sander's 1929 publication *Face of our Time* (*Antlitz der Zeit*), which can be understood as a book form preview of sixty photographs for *People of the Twentieth Century*. Jennings writes: 'The smooth flow of images from countryside through small town to city suggests, of course, the important demographic shift that had taken place in Germany in the first three decades of the century'.⁸ However, he also observes that at various junctures in this photobook the 'smooth flow' from countryside to city is deliberately disrupted by Sander's insertion of photographs of rural types in natural settings between urban types, irritating any visual reading that would seek 'progressive movement from agriculture to urban industry', an interruption that implied the 'survival of agricultural lives, as well as patterns and ideas, in the urban environment'.⁹ Jennings's interpretation is somewhat at odds with other discussions of Sander's treatment of rural subjects that suggest these Westerwald photographs are Sander's *homage* to an era that had all but vanished.¹⁰ What is undeniable though is that during the first half of Sander's lifetime rapid societal change took place. Towards the end of the nineteenth century forty per cent of the German population still worked in the countryside, a percentage that was reduced almost by half by the mid-1920s. In the 1930s, the shrinkage in the rural population was lamented in mass-market National Socialist magazines such as *Neues Volk*, a publication of the Office of Racial Policy, which published articles with demographic charts representing the decline of open farmland, and which disseminated conspiracy theories that a rootless urban Jewish population was eradicating the traditional German peasantry.¹¹ To counter the perceived threat of 'wandering Jews'

encouraging cosmopolitanism and diluting national cultural identity, the National Socialists developed racial theories which professed that the rooted peasantry represented the foundation of the German people, theories based on nineteenth-century agrarian romanticism and the early sociological writings of authors such as Riehl. These ideas were boiled down for popular consumption in fascist publications such as *Neues Volk*.

The sense of disruption in the sequence of images from rural to urban life discussed by Jennings with respect to *Face of our Time* is not evident in the larger project *People of the Twentieth Century*, which presents a visual taxonomy or portrait atlas of seven groupings of societal types with between one and twelve portfolios per grouping. It should be stressed though that the first publication of the latter in 1980 was a reconstruction of Sander's project compiled from his notes and negatives by Ulrich Keller in collaboration with Sander's son Gunther, rather than a project completed by his own hand. What is striking about the *Der Bauer* photographs in *People of the Twentieth Century* is that the strong presence of the peasant/farmer is registered not through any disruption of the later portfolios dedicated to urban life, but through appreciating the date span of this first group. Although the photographs are not ordered chronologically in the publication, the latest photograph of the entire project, taken some seven years after the end of the Second World War, is *Farmer Sowing* 1952 (fig.2). Considering that the oldest photograph, the one that initiates the project, *Man of the Soil* (fig.1), dates from 1910, the implication might be that the peasant 'type' is truly irreplaceable irrespective of societal shifts, although this point would have been made more emphatically had *Farmer Sowing* been placed at the end of the project; significantly it was not. ¹²



Fig.2
August Sander
Farmer Sowing 1952
Gelatin silver print on paper
image: 260 x 204 mm
ARTIST ROOMS Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. Lent by Anthony d'Offay 2010

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Taken in isolation, *Farmer Sowing* seems ideologically problematic in the way in which the representation of the sower appears to conform to what we know of other archaic sowing and ploughing images in various media co-opted by or created for National Socialist propaganda. Artists such as Albin Egger-Lienz (1868–1926), Emil Beithan (1878–1955), Oskar Martin-Amorbach (1897–1987), and Georg Sluyterman von Langeweyde (1903–1978) created paintings and prints that mythologised the German peasant as eternal and unchanging, an essential figure or *Ur-type* of 'blood and soil' ideology. Such representations of the peasantry were certainly much in evidence at the Great German Art Exhibition staged annually from 1937 onwards at the House of German Art, a monumental structure of Nazi architecture. These Nazi-sanctioned artworks rarely referred to the machine revolution in German agricultural production, but were consciously archaising in presenting strong peasants on the land, engaged in activities by old-fashioned hand-tool methods. Intriguingly, the term 'Nazi' was a derogatory nickname for a backwards peasant, a diminutive version of Ignatz, a common name in Bavaria and Austria. Opponents seized on this idea and reduced the party's title Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei to the dismissive 'Nazi'.

If not represented at work, the *Bauern* were portrayed together in a familial domestic environment, often at supertime, and were seen as symbolic of what the National Socialists purported to be the superiority of Aryan virtue and unity. It is notable that Sander also took a photograph of a farming family sat around a dinner table, *At Lunch* 1925–7, a photograph which compositionally at least is reminiscent of paintings by Thomas Baumgartner (1892–1962) and other artists celebrated by the National Socialists for promoting rural

family values. However, it should be stressed that this iconography was not exclusive to Nazi art, and it would be a distortion to make a firm connection between Sander and Baumgartner in this respect. *Völkisch* images of peasants were also created by German avant-garde artists in ways that might provoke a re-evaluation of what 'avant-gardism' means in German visual culture; although a detailed re-evaluation is beyond the scope of this article. For example, during the Weimar era, the former Brücke artists [Ernst Ludwig Kirchner](#) (1880–1938), ¹³ [Karl Schmidt-Rottluff](#) (1884–1976) and Max Pechstein (1881–1955) all independently produced paintings and prints depicting peasants or fishermen at work or sat around simple dinner tables, artworks that might be understood as a form of expressionist 'homeland art' (*Heimatkunst*) but paradoxically these were condemned by the National Socialists as 'degenerate', sullied interpretations of the kind of rural family life they extolled. While scenes of peasant life adorned the walls of the House of German Art, expressionist images of the peasantry were condemned in the 1937 *Degenerate Art* exhibition under the peculiar slogan 'German Peasants – A Yiddish Perspective', a slogan that at first sight makes little sense even by the twisted logic of National Socialism, as none of the displayed artists were of Jewish extraction. However, the meaning of this didactic explanation resides in the fact that such artworks had been collected or traded by Jews, and the slogan may also imply that such benefactors had actively encouraged these German artists to see 'unnaturally'. It was the intention of the National Socialists that the German public visit both the official House of German Art exhibition and the nearby Degenerate Art show, staged on the second floor of a building formerly occupied by the Institute of Archaeology, in order to become more conscious of the differences between so-called 'healthy German' artworks and what was considered to be a 'contaminated' expressionist art dealing with the same subject matter. ¹⁴

Of course, Sander's *Farmer Sowing* does not necessarily need to be understood in a German context; 'Sower' and 'Parable of the Sower' iconography abounds in the history of European art, a visual tradition that encompassed the work of artists as diverse as Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Jean-François Millet (1814–1875), and [Vincent van Gogh](#) (1853–1890). Nevertheless, in its frontality and with the right arm outstretched pose of the sower, Sander's *Farmer Sowing* could almost be a photographic rendition of Hans Thoma's title drawing (fig.3) for Adolf Bartels's well-illustrated study *The Peasant in German History* (*Der Bauer in der deutschen Vergangenheit*) published in 1900. Thoma, who was born and raised in Bernau, and grew up familiar with the peasant traditions of the Black Forest, was an apt choice of artist to design this book's title page. His work had been discussed by the critic Julius Meier-Graefe as 'real peasant art', ¹⁵ and he had been described in the English art magazine *Studio* as 'a genuine child of his soil'. ¹⁶ During this period, the term 'homeland art' (*Heimatkunst*) was very much in currency, referring to both a literary and artistic movement, and periodicals such as *Volkskunst und Volkskunde* (the organ of the Society of Folk Art and Folklore) and *Heimat*, the latter started by Bartels in 1897, advocated the recovery of the spiritual values of pre-industrialised communities. Unlike the progressive internationalist Meier-Graefe, Bartels was a highly reactionary nationalist who also worked as a prominent literary critic for the ultraconservative journal *Der Kunstwart*, whose *völkisch* ideology would filter into and in part shape National Socialist 'blood and soil' thinking. The ideas of Bartels had a strong influence, for example, on Richard Walther Darré's National Socialist publication *The Peasantry as the Life Source of the Nordic Race* (*Das Bauerntum als Lebensquell der nordischen Rasse*) published in 1928. By focusing on some of Sander's *Der Bauer* photographs in



Fig.3
Hans Thoma
The Sower, title page to
Adolf Bartels, *The Peasant in German History* 1900

isolation or through a partisan compilation excerpted from *People of the Twentieth Century*, his work could support an argument that he was simply extending the conservative *völkisch* concerns of Bartels's study into the twentieth century through the relatively new medium of photography. This essay does not support such a view, but it should not be entirely dismissed without reexamining the visual evidence and considering how these photographs *could* be interpreted. However, before further interrogating Sander's aesthetics in relation to a National Socialist ideological framework, and especially the work of the photographer Erna Lendvai-Dircksen (1883–1962), it is worth reflecting on his photographs with respect to some peasant images by modern artists the Nazis thought were 'degenerate', in order to provide another kind of context.

Peasant primitivism and peasant rebellion

In spite of the proliferation of publications associated with the more reactionary end of the *Heimatkunst* scale around the turn of the century, the figure of the peasant was not stable as a cipher of right-wing ideology. The topos also attracted German avant-garde artists who were as interested in the 'primitivism' of form as much as content, and who saw the 'peasant' as existing on the margins rather than central to society. The artists associated with [Wassily Kandinsky](#) (1866–1944), for instance, were moved by what they deemed to be the untainted piety of peasant life, and drew artistic inspiration from the formal simplicity of both Russian and Bavarian peasant craft objects.¹⁷ These artists, associated with the Munich New Artists' Association (Neue Künstlervereinigung München) and later Der Blaue Reiter made excursions to the village of Murnau in the Bavarian Alps where they frequently donned traditional Bavarian outfits and arguably embraced a simpler rural life.¹⁸ For a while, one of their circle, the aristocratic Marianne von Werefkin (1860–1938), produced a number of unidealised representations of the peasantry inspired by [Edvard Munch](#) (1863–1944), [Paul Gauguin](#) (1848–1903) and others. While in Murnau the artists stayed in a hillside house bought by the artist Gabriele Münter (1877–1962), decorated it with *völkisch* art and filled the rooms with colourful handmade peasant furniture. In the anti-academic ideology of Der Blaue Reiter, peasant handwork occupied an important place alongside religious folk art and medieval sculpture, old German and Japanese prints, tribal artefacts, and children's paintings, exemplified by the syncretism of Kandinsky's and Franz Marc's *Der Blaue Reiter* almanac (1911). The 'peasantry' clearly belonged to a spectrum of 'outsiders' who were privileged by Der Blaue Reiter's counter-canonical way of seeing.

Meanwhile in northern Germany, in the artist colony of Worpswede, Modersohn-Becker painted peasant life, particularly peasant girls, mothers, and devout old women (fig.4). In her expressive use of colour and in her unusual renditions of a familiar subject she did not shy from breaking artistic or social conventions or from departing from the cultural nationalism of other Worpswede artists such as Vinnen, who criticised her affinity with non-German artists such as van Gogh and Gauguin, artists who had produced their own striking representations of peasant life in Brabant and Breton respectively. In her diaries and letters, she waxed lyrical about the uncorrupted landscape and selfless people of this region, whom she described as having a 'simple capacity for sacrifice'.¹⁹ In Sander's representations of peasant women, it is possible to identify certain points of contact with Modersohn-Becker's canvases, although it should be remembered that Sander's photographs were commissioned by many of these Westerwald farming families, and rather than being represented in 'honest poverty', his sitters were often dressed up in

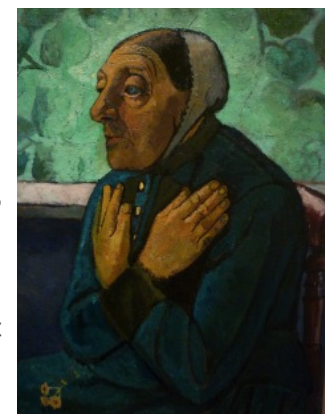


Fig.4
Paula Modersohn-Becker
Old Peasant Woman
1905
Oil paint on canvas

their Sunday best, however awkwardly their garments adorned their bodies; and clearly many wanted to be seen as prosperous as well as pious (fig.5).

Sander's work can also be compared to another important female artist of this period. More than any other artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) became committed to artistically representing the oppression of workers, both the rural and urban poor, and their rebellions against such oppression. Unlike Modersohn-Becker she did not participate in any artist-colony culture and she was only ever on the fringes of urban avant-garde activity. Her second major cycle of prints, *The Peasants' War*, inspired in part by her reading of the works of the political theorist Friedrich Engels and the historian Wilhelm Zimmermann, depicts a wild and angry crowd of peasants. Kollwitz was always interested in turning points in history, when oppression finally prompts action. She did not represent the German peasant in some idealised rural idyll in the same way as Ludwig Richter for she was always critical of the kind of conservative bourgeois values that sentimentalised the German people. Neither was she interested in drawing out the fundamental earthy qualities of the peasant through portraiture in the manner of Leibl or Modersohn-Becker. Rather in her print cycle she saw the peasant as a heroic revolutionary, an agent of social change, although one equally subject to violent subjugation. Kollwitz wrote: 'I read Zimmermann's Bauernkrieg, and there he tells of "Black Anna", a peasant woman who incited the peasants, I then made the large sheet with the swarms of peasants breaking out.'²⁰ This print, the etching *Outbreak* 1903 depicts the Black Anna from the rear, arms raised up in an excited gesture of revolutionary zeal.²¹

That Sander was well disposed to such modern interpretations of the peasant as revolutionary is proved by his ownership of a painting called *The German Peasants War* 1932 in a constructivist style by his socialist friend and Cologne Progressive Franz Seiwert, a canvas that was proudly hung in Sander's dining room.

In reconsidering the 'Stammappe' it could be argued that Sander identified his own Black Anna figure in his photograph *The Fighter, or Revolutionary* (fig.6). However, unlike the Kollwitz print that presents a mass of peasants in a dramatic scene of furious energy and lunging movement, the individual subject of Sander's photograph exists in quiet stasis, a contemplative rather than dynamic force. Sander's Black Anna, attired in a black shawl and other dark garments, is viewed frontally and in sharp focus rather than from behind. Her aged face framed by the shawl directly engages the gaze of the spectator, and her 'revolutionary' or 'fighter' zeal is mentally held rather than physically unleashed. Art historian Andy Jones has argued that in such photographs Sander subverted the terms of physiognomic analysis: 'His peasants are presented as bearers of knowledge in their own right. If physiognomists sought to marginalise the discourse of those they photographed, then Sander places that marginalised discourse at centre stage. His sitters are not objectified, but retain their status as subjects. The Stammappe thus exceeds the discursive limits of the instrumental archive.'²² This is critically important because it is partly what distinguishes Sander's work from the adoption of physiognomic

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Fig.5
August Sander
The Sage 1913
Gelatin silver print on paper
image: 259 x 190 mm
ARTIST ROOMS Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. Lent by Anthony d'Offay 2010

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Fig.6
August Sander
The Fighter or Revolutionary 1912
Gelatin silver print on paper
image: 258 x 190 mm
ARTIST ROOMS Tate

practice to eugenics photography demonstrated in publications such as the well-illustrated *Race-Lore of the German Volk* (*Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes*) (1922) by the German race researcher and eugenicist Hans Friedrich Karl Günther, or conversely, to the photographic identification of 'degenerate' types demonstrated in *Art and Race* (*Kunst und Rasse*) (1928) by the Nazi architect and cultural theorist Paul Schultze-Naumburg. Sander may have been interested in physiognomy, but as will be discussed, his work does not reflect an interest in race theory.

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The 'Stammappe': a portfolio of archetypes

Farming Couple: Propriety and Harmony, one of twelve striking photographs that belong to the 'Stammappe' is worthy of closer study (fig.7). The photograph, a gelatin silver print on paper, was taken by Sander using a large format, glass plate camera with a long exposure time, the kind primarily used in portrait studios, and it is known that he hauled such heavy equipment around the Westerwald.²³ It is a three-quarter-length double portrait that depicts an elderly farming couple posed formally outdoors in a natural arboreal setting. The man, who seems visually impaired, is seated and holds the end of a wooden walking stick, while the standing female figure clasps the wrinkled fingers of her left hand with her right hand, the short sleeves of her outfit exposing her gnarled wrists and forearms. They both appear to be attired in their 'Sunday best', but their clothes are rather ill-fitting. *Farming Couple: Propriety and Harmony*, the tenth in the portfolio, is dated 1912, although it should be observed that Sander only started to arrange these photographs systematically with his grand project in mind from the early 1920s, probably as a result of debating the social and aesthetic concerns of the day with a group of young left-wing artists known as the Cologne Progressives (Gruppe Progressiver Künstler Köln) who often gathered at his studio. Individual portraits for the 'Stammappe', which had originally been commissioned by farming families, were each emblematically retitled as *The Philosopher*, *The Fighter*, or *Revolutionary*, *The Sage* etc., each with male and female counterparts, signalling that they were 'prototypical building blocks of human society'.²⁴ *Farming Couple: Propriety and Harmony* is also the caption that Sander gave to the eleventh photograph in the 'Stammappe', which can be considered a counterpart to the tenth, in that for this double portrait the female figure is seated and the male figure is standing.



Fig.7
August Sander
Farming Couple - Propriety and Harmony
1912
Gelatin silver print on paper
image: 258 x 187 mm
ARTIST ROOMS Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. Lent by Anthony d'Offay 2010

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As in *The Man of the Soil*, the wooden staff that the seated male clasps in *Farming Couple* seems to organically connect him to the earth, an idea that is only emphasised by the vertical forms of the surrounding tree trunks and the wooden legs of the chair on which he sits. In the last photograph of the 'Stammappe', entitled *Three Generations of the Family* 1912 (fig.8), trees also serve as an effective arboreal backdrop suggestive of organic generational growth. The verb 'to grow' in German is appropriately enough *anbauen*, evidently related to the noun *Bauer*. A metaphor that was used repeatedly during the Kaiserreich was that of a forest of many different trees encapsulating the togetherness of all German lineages. The individual tree with its many boughs that had grown out of one trunk (*Stamm*), attested that all stemmed from the same root. As the art historian Monika Wagner has pointed out, *Der Kunstwart* published countless essays in which trees were attributed with 'determination – defiance – unrestrained strength – unfaltering energy', and

the resistant 'characteristics of wood were equated with the traits of the German people'.²⁵ But writing for *October* in 1996, George Baker examined the other related meaning of *Stamm*, namely 'tribe', and argued that the Nazis' racial emphasis on the *Stämme*, the 'originary Germanic tribes, rooted in the earth' in effect problematises Sander's project in that it implies certain shared values.²⁶ Importantly, Baker moderates this point by noting that 'Sander may have intended, of course, to stress only the botanical, organic metaphor in calling his originary project the *Stamm-Mappe*'.²⁷



Fig.8

August Sander

Farming Family 1913

Gelatin silver print on paper

image: 187 x 239 mm

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Faces of the Volk

When considering photobooks by German photographers of the late Weimar and early National Socialist period whose work bears some comparison with Sander's project, one name immediately comes to mind – Erna Lendvai-Dircksen. Six years younger than Sander, she studied painting at the Kunsthochschule Kassel from 1903 to 1905, and photography at the Lettehaus School of Photography in Berlin from 1910–11. According to the photography historian Andrés Zervigón her interest in the German peasant can be traced to 1911 when she 'accidentally photographed a blacksmith and tenant farmer while on vacation'. It was then that she realised how 'strongly these faces reflected a bond with and dependence on the land'.²⁸ She later more clearly articulated how the peasants' facial and bodily character, including their traditional attire, stood 'in accordance with the character of the landscape, from which they had developed a unique stamp' (fig.9).²⁹ Her interest in the 'characterological' or 'racial face' can be traced back to the late eighteenth-century physiognomic project of Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801),³⁰ but it was also motivated by her sentimental fascination with the populace and customs of different rural areas, areas that were under threat by the processes of industrialisation, a fascination that can be referred to a wider neo-



Fig.9

Erna Lendvai-Dircksen

Young Hessian Farmer

c.1930

Photograph, gelatin

silver print on paper

J. Paul Getty Museum

Romantic anti-urbanism, dating back to late nineteenth-century ideologists such as Langbehn and Bartels. In 1917 she made a series of photo-portraits of Germans of different regions, a selection of which won first prize at a prestigious exhibition in Frankfurt in 1926, and were included in her 1932 published collection *The Face of the German People* (*Das Deutsche Volksgesicht*), which was critically lauded in the right-wing press and by leaders of the National Socialist party. This collection 'featured elderly German farmers and fishermen whose self-sacrifice and family values were, in visual terms, "written across their faces"'.³¹ Lendvai-Dirksen was interested in the National Socialist's racial emphasis on the *Stämme* – the 'pureblooded' tribal lineage that she believed was expressed through physiognomy, and her photographs perhaps best illustrate what the term *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) actually means. She was a Nazi press club member and a photographer of 'Aryan' children for the eugenicist periodical *People and Race* (*Volk und Rasse*). After the success of *The Face of the German People* she produced a series of popular photobooks exploring Germany's regional Nordic 'tribes', released by the District Press of Bayreuth, an official publisher of the National Socialist government's propaganda ministry, which sold more than 300,000 volumes before the end of the Second World War.

When compiling her photobooks of peasant types, Lendvai-Dirksen sometimes named her subjects and sometimes anonymised them; she often gave some indication of their social status or familial role, but she always provided their rural origins, and typically these captions would read like the following: 'Farm Wife from the Island of Föhr. The Mother' (Bäuerin von der Insel Föhr. Die Mutter) or 'Frau Gesche H. from the old land Elbmarschen' (Frau Gesche H. aus dem alten Land Elbmarschen). These captions were often reinforced by interpretive text – poetry or excerpts from folk songs or fables that in various ways sanctioned the tradition, bloodlines and folk identity of the photographed representative of that regional 'tribe' – and she covered rural populations of areas such as the Schwarzwald, Spreewald, Schleswig-Holstein, Westfalen, Lüneburger Heide, Hotzenwald, Schwaben, the Rheinland, Eifel, and Hessen. Cumulatively, it was intended that the impact of these images with supportive text be to present a compendium of different enduring peasant 'types', whether they were from Pomerania or the River Schwalm region, each manifesting, like a wine, the specific locale of their region, but united by the deep roots of their collective German racial lineage. Her dramatically lit, hard-edged close-up photographs that reveal every line of the weather-worn faces of her rural subjects impart a sense of monumentality and timelessness, and in her later publications the same techniques would be used to document the fresh healthy faces of farm children, implicitly endorsing the National Socialist case for 'racial hygiene'. Lendvai-Dirksen attempted to show that these rural youths were physically and psychologically superior: 'Most of the children she photographed wear candid, serious expressions, suggesting their innate qualities of honesty, self-discipline and determination. The girls all wear their hair in braids while the boys wear the knee-length trousers traditionally worn by the peasant classes'.³² From 1932, as well as widening her focus to include children, Lendvai-Dirksen extended the geographical scope of her project both within and beyond German borders in producing photobooks such as *Face of the Eastern Germans* (*Das Gesicht des deutschen Ostens*) (1935), *Mountain People* (*Bergmenschen*) (1936), *North Sea People* (*Nordseemenschen*) (1937), and in the 1940s she produced volumes on the faces of the German people of Flanders, Holland, and Denmark after these territories had been occupied by the Nazis. Following Langbehn and the National Socialist ideologues inspired by his work, she maintained an elastic conception of the *Niederdeutsche* (Low German), who Langbehn had identified as a superior racial strain of marsh-dwelling and sea-faring peasants from the lowlands along the Baltic and North Seas from Denmark down through Holland.

Given Sander's own affection for the farming communities of his native Westerwald, and, at first glance, certain similarities between his project and Lendvai-Dircksen's, there is a temptation to push the affinities between his *Der Bauer* photographs and *The Face of the German People*. As the art historian Leesa Rittelmann has written: 'But for a few critical ideological differences in the intent of her project, Dircksen's celebrated photobook series *German Folk Faces* bore an uncanny resemblance to Sander's censured series *People of the Twentieth Century*'.³³ However, the divergences are more revealing and more important if Sander is to be rescued from the camp of reactionary aesthetics to which both Baker and Rittelmann, as well as other art historians, suspect his work could be realigned.³⁴

First, it should be emphasised that while Sander may well have been interested in the community and familial bonds of the Westerwald farmers he photographed, and would probably have related to the concept of *Gemeinschaft* (community) as described by Ferdinand Tönnies, he did not stress the regional identities of his sitters in the same way as Lendvai-Dircksen, only occasionally mentioning location in his short titles. With the exception of the unusual captions of the 'Stammappe' (for example *The Fighter, or Revolutionary, The Woman of Progressive Intellect* etc.), he did not provide interpretative adjunct material that would influence the viewer's way of seeing. There are important stylistic distinctions too. While Sander and Lendvai-Dircksen both created sharply defined images typical of the New Objectivity movement in photography, Sander did not adopt the same tight framing and close-up perspective for his *Der Bauer* images as Lendvai-Dircksen did for her own head-and-shoulder portraits of peasants. In this respect, her work had more in common with the physiognomic portrait galleries seen in National Socialist publications, such as the aforementioned *Race-Lore of the German Volk* by Günther, images often sourced from racial hygiene specialists and anthropologists. By contrast, and with few exceptions, Sander's photographs of individuals, couples, or groups, tended to be at least half or three quarter length, the scale of conventional bourgeois portraiture, rather than the close-up composition that was typically used for the analysis of racial types.

More important was the way in which his sitters were attired and what that dress code signalled about a society in transition. For Lendvai-Dircksen it was essential that her farmers were presented in local traditional peasant dress. Although dependent on region, her female subjects were often dressed in ornate and richly embroidered smocks and fine lace caps, all signifiers of specific cultural identities. She wanted her subjects to appear timeless and the eternal values of peasant life were of course a key element of National Socialist propaganda in various media, which emphasised the archaic rather than modern image of a farmer. Rittelmann cites Lendvai-Dircksen's description of the River Schwalm region in Hesse as a place 'undisturbed by contemporary forces, as if here the faces of the middle ages are permitted to stand as a monument'.³⁵ Sander did not attempt to eternalise or monumentalise his subjects. In direct contrast to Lendvai-Dircksen, his farmers mostly appear in ill-fitting, formal dark suits, which are 'dictated by the economic logic of fashion, not by the physiognomic-racial logic of rural existence'.³⁶ The Marxist critic John Berger, often seen as an interpreter of the philosopher Walter Benjamin (one of Sander's earliest champions), famously wrote an essay on this subject.³⁷ In 'The Suit and the Photograph' (1980) Berger analyses *Young Farmers* 1914 (fig. 10) from Sander's *Der Bauer* grouping that totally undercuts the aspirations of National Socialist propaganda images celebrating the timeless



Fig.10
August Sander
Young Farmers 1914
Gelatin silver print on
paper
image: 257 x 180 mm
ARTIST ROOMS Tate
and National Galleries
of Scotland. Lent by
Anthony d'Offay 2010

peasant. ³⁸ Berger writes: 'The date is 1914. The three young men belong, at the very most, to the second generation who ever wore such suits in the European countryside. Twenty or 30 years earlier, such clothes did not exist at a price which peasants could afford.' ³⁹ Berger suggests that these mass market suits, emulating the higher quality attire of the bourgeois urban class, draws attention to rather than disguises their 'social caste', and not in a flattering sense: 'Their hands look too big, their bodies too thin, their legs too short.' ⁴⁰ In considering these young farmers he discusses a social group not beyond the reach of aspirational advertising campaigns and travelling salesmen, and in a state of awkward transition, succumbing to a 'cultural hegemony'. What Berger does not mention though is how the posturing of these three rural 'lads' on the way to a dance confounds and subverts expectations of the peasant 'type'. This subversion is perhaps best exemplified by the leftmost figure, unkempt hair peeking out from his tilted hat, cigarette dangling nonchalantly from his lips, wooden cane held at an angle as if he is pulling free from the roots of his native soil. His snappy headgear, possibly some sort of fedora or homburg, either way a contemporary fashion item, is evidently associated with a modern urban rather than archaic rural milieu, and gives him and the others a 'man about town' rather than a 'man from the land' demeanour, irrespective of any disjuncture between the shape of the suits and the shape of their bodies. It is quite unlike any of the static images from the 'Stammappe', and in many respects represents an 'act of self-dramaturgy', the result of an 'exploratory dialogue between the photographer and his subjects'. ⁴¹ The subversiveness of the image is only heightened by the youth's smoking of a cigarette, which is not something seen in a Lendvai-Dirksen photograph or conventional nineteenth-century German paintings of farmers. Peasant iconography usually dictated the smoking of a pipe, an implement often handcrafted from wood, and which like a wooden staff could connote an organic connection to the native soil as well as a certain time-honoured wisdom. By contrast, the cigarette was often understood as an urban symbol of social dissolution. Art historian Patricia Berman has discussed how at this time the cigarette served as a nexus for marginal social identities. Mass marketed since the 1880s 'it played a role in both Max Nordau's condemnation of Degeneration and J.K. Huysmans's celebration of Decadence, in medical and sociological theories of aberrancy'. ⁴² Furthermore, the pose of the smoking youth in Sander's photograph suggests that he may have witnessed the 'act' of smoking in a silent movie, perhaps shown in a storefront cinema (a *Kintopp*) of a small nearby town, and as early movies in Germany were popular with their relatively uneducated audience they were subject to criticism by an educated bourgeoisie, who often saw them as 'dangerous, and perhaps even immoral or revolutionary'. ⁴³ With the mock-urban almost *flâneur* poses of the three figures walking on an overgrown path, incongruously set against an out-of-focus marshy barren landscape, *Young Farmers* certainly has a strange cinematographic quality, capturing what Jennings has described as the 'momentum of the transition away from the land and into the cities'. ⁴⁴

This undercutting of the noble stoic peasant type is by no means an isolated example in Sander's portfolios, and in considering a second photograph, this time of musicians, but also from the *Der Bauer* group, Berger writes: 'Their suits deform them. Wearing them, they look as though they were physically misshapen.' And further: 'The musicians give the impression of being uncoordinated, bandy-legged, barrel-chested, low-arsed, twisted or scalene. The violinist on the right is made to look almost like a dwarf.' ⁴⁵ Berger's description is somewhat extreme, but it does much to counter any suggestion that Sander and Lendvai-Dirksen shared a similar approach to portrait photography and the same appreciation of rural types. The more closely one examines the seven portfolios that make up Sander's *Der Bauer* after the 'Stammappe', the more evident it becomes how removed they are from any kind of propaganda apparatus that might seek to establish the biological superiority of the 'Nordic' race, as was clearly Lendvai-Dirksen's intention.

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Had Sander just continued to produce portfolios in the style of the 'Stammappe', generating images that simply suggest a rootedness of farming communities to their native soil, then a discussion concerning the affinities between his photographs and Lendvai-Dircksen's would have much stronger justification, but he did not, and his visual sociological project was of a completely different nature to her biological one, or those of other racial ideologues. The cultural historian Richard Gray has even discussed Sander's photographs as constituting 'counter-racist physiognomics'.⁴⁶ The art historian Shearer West is of a different opinion and has argued that in spite of his progressive intentions 'by presenting his people of the twentieth century as types, he inadvertently reinforced a prevailing right wing view that vestiges of class, race, and profession could be read into the face and body'.⁴⁷ But even within the *Der Bauer* grouping there is an incredible diversity of peasant 'type' from sowers, cycling farmers, young men smoking cigarettes, and modern 'gentleman farmers', and diversity from within the same rural region. Furthermore, Sander was clearly interested in individual subjectivity within the type, often explicitly, as Jones has discussed, drawing 'attention to the "voice" of the sitter', all of which meant that collectively his images were impotent as a form of right-wing propaganda, but fascinating as a visual document gauging complex societal transitions.⁴⁸ In cataloguing different and often conflicting forms of experience and knowledge *People of the Twentieth Century* is, to use the terminology of the Russian cultural critic Mikhail Bakhtin, openly 'dialogical', whereas Lendvai-Dircksen's project is 'monological', effectively closing down realities that do not suit those objectives steered by a particular political belief system, in short, a visual apparatus serving a totalitarian regime. Sander had no truck with racial theory and was no sympathiser of the National Socialists, even though he photographed them too. He intended to create a compendium of all types of people living in contemporary Germany. His inclusion of gypsies, the unemployed, and others on the margins of German society in his first published version of the project, *Face of our Time*, led to the confiscation of the publication and the destruction of his photographic plates in 1936. His son Erich, who was a member of the left-wing Socialist Workers' Party (SAP) was arrested by the National Socialists in 1934 and sentenced to ten years in prison, where he died of neglect in 1944. Previous academic attempts to connect Sander's work to more reactionary Weimar philosophies have never rung true because they have often overstressed discourses on typology and eugenics without fully taking into account the visual evidence and incredible range of representation within the portfolios that make up the seven groups. It is hoped that this essay has shown that the peasant motif was not exclusively a reactionary trope, and as such Sander's work can effectively be compared with a wide range of artists of varied political persuasions and historical periods who have explored its symbolic potency, and not just those National Socialist proponents of racial purity.

Notes

1. August Sander cited in *In Focus: August Sander: Photographs from the J. Paul Getty Museum*, Los Angeles 2000, p.12.
2. For a scholar's edition of Sander's unfinished project see *August Sander, Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts Studienband*, ed. by Susanne Lange and Gabriele Conrath-Scholl, Munich 2001, pp.101–18. See also the seven volume reconstruction *August Sander: People of the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Susanne Lange, Gabriele Conrath-Scholl and Gerd Sander, Cologne 2002.
3. In this article, the terms 'farmer' and 'peasant' are used deliberately and sometimes interchangeably depending on the context.
4. Keith Moxey, 'Sebald Beham's Church Anniversary Holidays: Festive Peasants as Instruments of Repressive Humor', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol.12, nos.2–3, 1981–2, pp.107–30.
5. Herbert Zschellentschky, *Die 'Drei Gottlosen Maler' von Nürnberg*, Leipzig 1975, p.333.
6. Ulrich Keller, 'August Sander: A German Biography', in August Sander, *Citizens of the Twentieth Century: Portrait Photographs 1892–1952*, ed. by Gunther Sander, trans. by Linda Keller, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1986, p.12–22.

7. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, ed. by Jose Harris, trans. by Margaret Hollis, Cambridge 2001, p.19.
8. Michael Jennings, 'Industry, and the Birth of the Photo-Essay in the Late Weimar Republic', *October*, vol.93, Summer 2000, p.29.
See also August Sander, *Face of Our Time*, 1929, Munich 1994.
9. Jennings 2000, p.32.
10. See *In Focus: August Sander*, 2000, p.16.
11. See Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2003, p.119.
12. Poignantly, the last photograph in the seventh grouping *Die letzten Menschen (The Last People)* is the death mask of his son Erich who died in prison because of the wilful neglect of the Nazi prison authorities.
13. From 1917 until his suicide in 1938, Kirchner lived alongside Swiss peasants in the alpine landscape of the Davos region. He represented them in every medium, including photography, and was inspired by their craft traditions. While Kirchner's photographs are amateurish in relation to Sander's, some of them are worthy of close comparison. See *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Photographic Work*, Davos 2006.
14. For further discussion of the National Socialist reception of expressionism and expressionist renditions of the peasant motif see Christian Weikop (ed.), *New Perspectives on Brücke Expressionism: Bridging History*, Farnham 2011, pp.193–210.
15. Julius Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics*, 1904, trans. by Florence Simmonds and George W. Chrystal, 2 vols., New York 1968, vol.1, 1968, p.158.
16. Hans W. Singer, 'Hans Thoma and his Work', *Studio*, vol.10, 1897, p.82.
17. For a discussion of Kandinsky's interest in the peasant trope, and the fascination that his circle had for peasant culture, see Shulamith Behr, *Expressionism*, London 1999, pp.30–46.
18. 'Excursion' is the key word here. Even if they stayed in Murnau for months at a time it is important to note that they did not 'give up' their more cosmopolitan lives in the chic artist quarter of Schwabing in Munich.
19. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *The Letters and Journals*, ed. and trans. by Günter Busch, Liselotte von Reinken, Arthur S. Wensinger and Carole Clew Hoey, Evanston 1983, p.118.
20. Käthe Kollwitz cited in Elizabeth Prelinger, Alessandra Comini and Hildegard Bachert, *Käthe Kollwitz*, Washington 1992, p.33.
21. Käthe Kollwitz, *Outbreak* 1902 (Käthe-Kollwitz-Museum, Berlin), http://www.kaethe-kollwitz.de/werkschau_10.htm, accessed 30 April 2012.
22. Andy Jones, 'Reading August Sander's Archive', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.23, no.1, 2000, p.5.
23. In conversation with the author, Gerd Sander remarked that his grandfather was physically built rather like the farmers he depicted, and had developed 'muscles like a carthorse', probably from carrying all his photographic equipment. Gerd Sander, interview with the author, 11 February 2011.
24. *In Focus: August Sander*, 2000, p.12.
25. Monika Wagner, 'Wood – "Primitive" Material for the Creation of "German Sculpture"', in Weikop 2011, p.77.
26. George Baker, 'Photography Between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait', *October*, no.76, Spring 1996, p.84.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Andrés Zervigón, 'Lendvai-Dirksen's German Volk Face: The Aesthetics and Reception of Fascist Abjection', unpublished paper presented at the College Art Association annual conference, New York, 13 February 1997, cited in Anne Maxwell, *Picture Imperfect: Photography and Eugenics, 1870–1940*, Eastbourne 2010, p.194.
29. Erna Lendvai-Dirksen, 'Über deutsche Porträtphotographie', *Das Atelier des Photographen*, vol.40, 1933, p.84, cited in Leesa Rittelmann, 'Facing Off: Photography, Physiognomy, and National Identity in the Modern German Photobook', *Radical History Review*, vol.106, Winter 2010, p.138.
30. See Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*, Detroit 2004, pp.353–4.
31. Rittelmann 2010, p.140.
32. Maxwell 2010, p.189.
33. Rittelmann 2010, p.155.
34. Art historian Sarah James has discussed how since Walter Benjamin's endorsement of Sander, art historians and critics including Allan Sekula and Benjamin Buchloh have suggested that the politically engaged nature of Sander's work was overestimated by Benjamin, who ignored the more conservative 'anti-modernist, static, hierarchical, positivist, and universalising' aspects of his project. See Sarah James, 'A Socialist Realist Sander? Comparative Portraiture as a Marxist Model in the German Democratic Republic', *Grey Room*, no.47, Spring 2012, p.42. See also Allan Sekula, 'The Traffic in Photographs', *Art Journal*, vol.41, no.1, 1981, pp.15–25; Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, 'Residual Resemblance: Three Notes on the Ends of Portraiture', in Melissa E. Feldman (ed.), *Face-Off: The Portrait in Recent Art*, Philadelphia 1994, p.56.
35. Lendvai-Dirksen cited in Rittelmann 2010, p.141.
36. Gray 2004, p.373.

- 37.Walter Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', 1931, trans. by Stanley Mitchell, *Screen*, vol.13, no.1, Spring 1972, p.22.
- 38.John Berger, 'The Suit and the Photograph', *About Looking*, New York 1980, p.27–36.
- 39.Ibid., p.30.
- 40.Ibid., p.33.
- 41.See Gray 2004, p.375.
- 42.Patricia Berman, 'Edvard Munch's Self-Portrait with Cigarette: Smoking and the Bohemian Persona', *The Art Bulletin*, vol.75, no.4, 1993, p.627.
- 43.Stephen Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film*, Rochester 2010, p.19.
- 44.Jennings 2000, p.32.
- 45.Berger 1980, p.31.
- 46.Gray 2004, pp.369–80.
- 47.Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890–1937: Utopia and Despair*, Manchester 2000, p.167.
- 48.Jones 2000, p.6.

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Christian Weikop is Chancellor's Fellow in the History of Art Department, Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh

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